

May 2004 saw the culmination of Brass Fusion, a project supported by Music for Youth, which brought both British and Asian Brass Band styles together at the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester. It was a rare example from the world of brass of how performers in mainstream music are seeking to address the issue of cultural diversity in a society in which 4.6 million people, or 7.9 per cent of the total population, belong to ethnic groups other than white.

Such cross cultural activities are commonplace now in the world of classical music, thanks to initiatives driven by the Arts Council for England and other bodies, and steps taken by the orchestras themselves. Most of them now reach out to minority communities via their programming and through outreach projects; and the Association of British Orchestras (ABO), the body which provides a collective voice for orchestras across the country, has in recent years co-ordinated a number of discussions and activities related to the subject. In 2003 it hosted a high-profile one day seminar on Cultural Diversity and the Classical Music Industry at the Royal Festival Hall, attended by orchestra representatives from across the nation, education and the media. This was soon followed by a networking event attended by 50 chief executives of orchestras and composers and performers from ethnic minority backgrounds to enable the development of new projects.

This is not to say that non-white faces are no longer a rare site in the ranks of the nation's orchestras, but there is no doubt that the classical music world is taking the cultural diversity issue seriously. There are a number of reasons why this has become essential for them. Stephen Maddocks, Chief Executive of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO), summarised them eloquently at the 2003 ABO conference. Describing the motives behind the Orchestra's three year *Harmony* project, which aims to highlight the connections between western classical music and other cultures, he included the following in his list of reasons:

- A desire to expand the repertoire
- A desire to service the community
- A wish to break down perceptions of classical music
- A need to increase income by tapping into new resources.

He went on to say: "This last reason is surely one of the major factors in the desire to increase diversity. As current audience figures dwindle, a new audience needs to be found and the increasing numbers of middle class families from ethnic minorities seem to be an obvious new target."

For those working in the orchestral field, then, the reasons for addressing the diversity issue are not simply altruistic. There is a financial imperative to reach out to new audiences. A further contributory factor is that orchestras tend to be publicly funded bodies, part of whose remit is to reach out as widely as possibly to the surrounding community.

In the Brass Band world it is, as a general rule, still a different story. For the most successful bands declining audiences are not an issue. And, while a number of bands do now get involved in educational outreach projects, the amateur status of most bands means that imaginative cross-culture ventures are less easy to put into practice.

In looking into the current state of cultural diversity in the world of music for *Brass Herald* I came to the conclusion that the best way to approach the topic would be to let some of the very interesting projects and points of view that I came across in my research speak for themselves. Space does not allow me to cover every single area of professional music-making that has a contribution to make to this debate on this occasion. The role that the conservatoires have to play, for example, and the way in which the mainstream music curriculum in schools these days emphasises music from other cultures, are both aspects that will have to wait for another time. But there is plenty here to stimulate debate.

Christopher Houlding, Senior Tutor in Trombone at the Royal Northern College of Music, Principal Trombone at Opera North, and Principal Conductor of the Bradford Youth Orchestra:

“I have lived in the Bradford (West Yorkshire) area for the past 18 years and have been aware of attempts to integrate the large Asian community into a very traditional former mill town fabric. I am very keen myself to be involved in initiatives of this kind. Indeed some three years ago I tried to instigate a

project which involved the development of a community improvised piece with Asian musicians and local brass band players being guided toward an artistic sharing. As it happens, the time was not yet right for that project. But I feel there is still plenty of scope for such things, though it is probably in the world of dance where the best chances lie.

”The Bradford Youth Orchestra is at present an exclusively western ensemble, but as its new Principal Conductor I have plans to attract more Asian interest in the future. These include a collaboration with one of the foremost Asian dance companies, improvisation sessions with Asian musicians and the establishing of an accepted multi cultural (fusion) sound.”

The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO) is based in the city forecast to be Britain’s first ethnic-majority city by 2020. The Orchestra are currently in the second year of their Harmony Project which has seen them working with diverse communities in Birmingham ‘to create literal and metaphorical cultural harmony.’ This year’s theme is Music of Black Origin and sees the Orchestra working with, among others, Birmingham-based vocal quintet Black Voices and the BBC Big Band to perform works by Duke Ellington, Nat ‘King’ Cole, Sir Michael Tippett, Samuel Coleridge Taylor (the first prominent Black British composer), and excerpts from Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess. Keith Stubbs is the Orchestra’s Education and Projects Manager.

“The CBSO has had this multi-layered approach for a long time now, with the programming linking up with our educational work and with the outreach work that the orchestral musicians undertake out in the community. Our aim is to make it easy for families to feel comfortable at our concerts.

“We have a number of specific educational projects on the go supporting the Music of Black Origin programming, but because we are a very culturally diverse community anyway, we tend to work all the time with people from all sorts of cultural backgrounds. For example, today downstairs in the CBSO centre we have our ‘gifted and talented’ showcase for youngsters from secondary schools all over Birmingham of whom I would say 60 or 70% were from Afro Caribbean or Asian backgrounds.

“All the time though, it is always going to be more difficult to involve people in what are thought of as the conventional music for the white population of the country – classical music or brass bands – rather than those genres more naturally attracting people from different ethnic backgrounds, such as soul bands or soul singers. While classical or brass bands might have one or two young players, it’s never going to be in the same proportion.”

The Bollywood Brass Band is the Indian Brass soundlike band which has been described as being ‘as authentically subcontinental as chicken tikka masala’. It is comprised of mainly European brass players who have teamed up with Asian drummers to play popular tunes and current or classic Hindi film

hits. The Band took part in Brass Fusion 2005. Kay Charlton plays Trumpet and Flugelhorn in the Band.

“When we go out and play at Divali and at Asian weddings – which is what we do the most of – people are always very impressed. The guests simply cannot believe that white people can play this traditional music and they love it. At that level it really works cross-culturally.

“We enjoyed taking part in Brass Fusion but I didn’t feel in the end it reached the right people. The audience was mainly made up of the parents of the children playing in the brass bands involved in the event. Although it involved Asian music it did not really reach the wider Asian community. With Bollywood we have gone into schools, explaining about the instruments and the music, and it would be nice to have an element of that within Brass Fusion, if it happens again.

“As a teacher at several schools in London I have quite a few Asian students. I think because they are not part of their cultural tradition it is difficult for their parents to see music as a serious thing. They are even less keen than the average white British parent for their children to adopt the precarious career of the musician!

John Ingham, who plays bass trombone in the Brighouse and Rastrick Band teaches music for a local authority with a large Asian population. He shares

Kay Charlton's view that a lack of understanding of the cultural tradition means that his students sometimes miss parental encouragement.

“Students often play for a while, but because they are not encouraged at home, their interest tends to trail off. I think the only way that can change is if the generations get less traditional, and that’s going to take a while.

“As for brass bands, unlike orchestras they are not suffering from audience decline. A top band like Brighouse and Rastrick can expect to get a full house every time. And at a more grass roots level, brass banding is essentially just amateur music making. I see it as a cultural issue that brass bands are predominantly white. I don’t think brass bands see it as a problem. It’s just the way it is. They don’t have a need to reach out like orchestras do.”

Derek Rawlinson is Chairman of the Brighouse and Rastrick Band

“Of course we have people in our band from all cultures – Scottish, Irish, Welsh – and so on. So far Asian people have just not seemed to want to get involved. It’s just a fact that there are not many Asian brass players - like in football where there used not to be many Asian players. It’s a cultural thing.”

Paul Fensom, Head of the Music Service in the London Borough of Brent, where there is a high ethnic mix. He, too, makes the football analogy:

“It is a role model problem for a lot of children from ethnic minority backgrounds – they don’t see people like them playing western musical instruments. I have got 53 members of staff and only 3 black teachers – so

kids don't get to see people like them doing it. It's similar to that other thing whereby the boys play trumpet and the girls play the flute because most of my trumpet teachers are men and most of my flautists are women.

"Despite this, our ethnic monitoring scheme shows that we have got lots of Asian kids, lots of black kids, lots of English and Irish kids, playing the violin,. It's a real melting pot here.

"I think evolution will do it, like in football. It will keep on gradually changing as it has been doing already. Twenty years ago my youth band was one of the few that had black and Asian kids in it and was seen as something of a novelty. But that's changing now."

Chris Wormald, is Director of Arts at Smithills School, renowned for its prize-winning brass bands, and one place where the integration seems to be complete.

"The mix in our bands has just grown up naturally. When I started in 1990, the original school band was formed of a group of friends – half of them hindu half white – who wanted to play and it just grew from that. Others saw them playing – brothers, sisters, friends – and they all wanted to do it. They are just people who want to play

"In our senior Brass bands half the principals – I can think of the Assistant Principal Cornet, for example – are of Hindu origin. We don't think about it.

They are just people. Ethnicity at our school is now running at 28/29%. It used to be higher and the make-up of the brass bands just reflects that. At one point all our 10 principals were Asian, at another all white. When our first solo horn player, a young Hindu, got on the front cover of Brass Band World that was a big deal for others, but not for us.

“Every time we go to National Festivals, other people still do a double take when they see our multi-cultural mix. And we in turn, notice that other bands are completely white when, given what their home towns are, you would expect them to be otherwise.

“We have been educating the parents through the kids. We will have a muslim sitting next to a hindu to a white player in a band and have the parents sitting next to one another in the audience.

“As for going into music as a profession – I would agree that further up the line they might not be encouraged by families to pursue a precarious profession like that. But having said that, all our top performers have been of such personality that they have broken down barriers by being fabulously talented. Some of them have gone on to study music at a higher level and to keep their music going. One of our Principal drummers went on to LIPA in its early days, got a degree and formed an all-Asian rock band. They worked as professional musicians for 2 solid years.”

James Williams, Eb Bass player, Severn Tunnel Band

“You can’t help noticing that even the bands based in towns with strong ethnic minorities don’t have many, if any players in them that reflect those different communities. I think this noticeable absence reflects the overall archaic mentality of the brass band movement. Many brass bands are still so set on their goal of achieving contest success, still working within a system of rules some 120 years ago, that they have lost touch with the true essence of the brass band movement i.e. to serve and be serviced by its local community. The communities of 1890s industrial Britain have changed greatly and yet the brass band movement has not. For example, it is only in recent years that women have gained seats into the top section bands. And it’s just the same with the attitude to ethnic minorities; brass bands need to actively engage members of their local communities because without this support brass bands will not survive.”

The National South Asian Youth Orchestra (Samyo) was commissioned through funding from Youth Music in 2002, when it held national auditions to identify some of the most talented young musicians in the UK. What makes the orchestra special is its combination of North Indian, or Hindustani Classical music, and also South Indian, or Carnatic Music. Apart from this, Samyo invites guest composers to write music influenced by modern melodies and rhythms. The orchestra is comprised mainly of strings, with wind being represented by flute. . Alok Nayak is the Orchestra’s Manager:

“We do not have a policy only to recruit amongst those of South Asian background but in fact all the players are from there. That’s simply the way it is at the moment. But the orchestra has not been going long enough for it to be otherwise. In future as the word spreads – they will not necessarily just be youngsters of South Asian origin.

“Our other band, Tarang, which is for the over eighteens, has a number of English people who have been lucky enough to go to India and study and become involved in the music. There is a young saxophonist who has learnt South Asian classical music and wanted to explore it further over here. There is also a young English woman who learnt flute from one of the great teachers in India.”

Music for Youth, the educational charity with a worldwide reputation for its work in music education, provides free access to educational and performance opportunities for all kinds of groups of young musicians and audiences through a nationwide series of festivals and concerts that run throughout the year. The National Festival of Music for Youth is the biggest event of its kind in the world with up to 10,000 young musicians performing over 800 different works before large audiences. Every kind of music, played by every kind of group and ensemble, is represented.

Music for Youth for the first time analysed the ethnicity of the participants in the 2004 National Festival. This analysis showed that the percentage of

young people from black or black British and other ethnic minorities (with the exception of Asian British) who took part in the Festival was higher than the percentage of those groups found across the national population. For example 13.8% of the participants came from black or black British backgrounds, as compared with the 2% identified as belonging to that group nationally. By contrast, the percentage of Asian Britons who took part (2.1%) did not reflect the national figure of 4%.

Those Music for Youth figures are slightly encouraging, suggesting that the organization is having success in drawing young people of black origin at least, into the country's musical life. It is a good note on which to conclude this perhaps rather quirky look at the different ways in which musicians are tackling, and thinking about, the multicultural issue in 2005.

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